

**PLENARY SESSION LECTURE**

  
**“B O D H I D H A R M A”**  


**FROM MYTH TO REALITY**

by

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**Chennai, India** – It is my pleasure, after about thirty years of on-and-off research, to be able to throw light with conclusive evidence on the existence of **Bodhidharma**, the 28<sup>th</sup> Patriarch after the Buddha in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. Though he is an icon in the Mahayana tradition, many so-called scholars and researchers still stubbornly continue to insist that he is a myth. Unfortunately their research, and thereby their conclusion, lacks substance. To give one example, a book, in fact two books, written by a Father Damoulin, a Jesuit priest in Japan tries its very best to prove Bodhidharma a myth because of wrong dates found in various records of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries.

But, one must remember that those books and records were written in the 5<sup>th</sup> and following centuries in various parts of China. Those were the days when there was no electricity, no computers, no phones and no peer review as we have it today and hence mistakes were bound to occur. Today, even with all these facilities of modern technology, mistakes are still being made.

Also in those days for information to go from one part of China to another took months, if not more. However, the presence of these mistakes does not mean that Bodhidharma did not exist, as some westerners propagate.

By the same token, the recently discovered Book of Judas, which has been authenticated and published by National Geographic, completely overturns what the Christian faith has been teaching for centuries. Does that mean Jesus Christ did not exist, or was a myth?

Why is it when the attention turns to Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam, to name a few, which have all existed before Christianity came into being – to the exclusion of Islam – that the words mythology, fake, and other such derogatory terms are applied. And this also applies to the traditional arts of many countries – like Yoga, Kalaripayat, Ayurveda, TCM or Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Kampo. No doubt, with the Internet and TV these bigoted ideas, which were born in ignorance and arrogance, are now changing as people, scholars, and researchers are looking at religions and traditional art forms from a different perspective.

As far as I know, there is no ‘historical’ fact (so far) available in India about the 28<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of Mahayana Buddhism. There are many theories but nothing substantive. This may be due to what historians have described as the ‘long night’ in South Indian history, which was between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which period a lot of records were destroyed due to either natural calamities or because warring factions destroyed records when they conquered the opposing parties, groups, or tribes. We know from whatever historical facts that exist today that there were four groups at that time in South India when Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka didn’t exist as we know of them today. The whole area had the Cholas, Cheras, Pandayas, and Pallavas roaming around picking fights with each other.

However, at that time another group was also around and they were the Kallabhras. At one period they also ruled and, like the Pallavas, were strong supporters of Buddhism. But they were so hated by the Pallavas that when the Pallavas finally conquered them, they destroyed all records about the Kallabhras, who they considered a barbaric group.

While there have been many theories that Bodhidharma was a Pallava, we must also ask the question whether he may have been a Kallabhra, and that is why, maybe, there is no record traceable about him.

Japanese groups have been doing a lot of research about Bodhidharma, whom they fondly call as Daruma San or Mr. Daruma, and have traced the various Patriarchs of Mahayana Buddhism from the Buddha all the way to Bodhidharma, the last and 28<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of Mahayana Buddhism in India and the first Patriarch of Chan Buddhism in China.

Bodhidharma who propagated his own version of Mahayana Buddhism was the last Patriarch in India, and the first Patriarch of Mahayana Buddhism in China, where Mahayana became Chan Buddhism and where Bodhidharma came to be known as Da'mo.

When he was reincarnated in Japan, he came to be fondly known as Daruma San and the original Mahayana Buddhism came to be known, again, as a branch of Zen Buddhism. It traveled from China to Japan through Korea. In Korea it is known as Seon.

But, let us now concentrate on Bodhidharma in China, where a lot of records are available about his existence, including one eye witness account. According to various Chinese records, he took about three years to reach Guangzhou in the Guangdong Province in present day China.

Now, one may ask why it took three years to reach China from India. Well, let me say again it is the 5<sup>th</sup> century we are talking about. With no electrical or nuclear powered ships, in those days they used sailing vessels made of timber and most probably also used rowers to sail from one place to another. As they did not have the modern conveniences of refrigeration and water storage facilities, they also had to land at various places en route to China to pick up fresh supplies.

Since it is said that he was from Kanchipuram, he would have started his long journey from the port of Mahabalipuram. It is said that he disembarked at many places en route to China - some of those places being Palembang, which was the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Srivijaya and the present capital of the South Sumatra province in Indonesia. It is also said that he disembarked in Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. I have found some traces of his visit at a temple in Johor, Malaysia.

After landing in the ancient city of Kuang/Guang/Kwang Cho (a Port on the Pearl River) and what is now known as Guangzhou Bodhidharma stayed at the present day Hualin Temple and started to preach his version of Mahayana Buddhism. Propagating the

concept of “no dependence on the written word but the transmission (of knowledge) from mind to mind”; he also revered the Lankavatara Sutra and it is said that when he finally passed on his authority to the second Patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism, Hui K'e, he not only gave him his robe and begging bowl but also gave him a copy of the Lankavatara Sutra.

When he landed in Guangzhou Bodhidharma was met by the Governor of Guangzhou, Xiao Ang and a military official Shao Yang, who had heard in advance about his arrival. Bodhidharma also found to his pleasure quite a few Indians there who had initially come as traders and had then settled down among the locals. Guangzhou at that time was the largest trading port in the south east of China and going back in history its original name was Kuang/Guang or Kwang Chow, also called Panyu in some documents. Later on in the 1600's, when the Portuguese arrived there it was also referred to as Canton or what they refer to in Portuguese as Cantao.

The Indians who had settled there were fluent in the older version of Cantonese, the language spoken by the locals, and initially helped Bodhidharma as interpreters, till Bodhidharma picked up the local dialect of Cantonese and also the main language of China, Mandarin.

He stayed at the Hualin Temple preaching there for three years and during this period also lectured at the Guangxie Temple, which is a few miles from the Hualin Temple.

Finding the water in Guangzhou brackish, he had five small wells dug close to each other, each just a foot in diameter. These wells have been preserved in his memory and are located just outside the compound of the Hualin Temple and are marked with a walled off area and two stone markers. One stone marker has the caption ‘One flower - five leaves’ and the other stone marker has the caption ‘Five eyes old well’. He also had a larger single well dug in the compound of the Guangxie Temple, about 10 feet in diameter, which has also been preserved and marked with a stone marker.

The three gates to the Hualin Temple carry the caption “Visitor from the West”. The place where he first stepped off the ship in Guangzhou has also been marked with a stone marker. Here the caption reads: “Landing place of Visitor from the West.” It also mentions that he landed during the period of the Liang Dynasty. Again, that was in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and presently this location, which was originally the harbor, is at least three miles from the banks of the Pearl River. This is because over the centuries the Pearl River deposited sand and silt and now the whole area from the Temple to the River is full of shops and residences. Among the many eating places, there is also a Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonalds, and also a pizza parlor. The whole area has come to be known as Hualin and the huge open square nearby is also a place where especially the young congregate in the evenings.

In the Hualin Temple, the Chinese have installed a huge metal statue of Bodhidharma -

about 75 feet high, which they claim is the largest statue of this icon in the world. The heading reads “Holy statue of Master Da’mo.” Just inside the present entrance to the Hualin Temple, on the right is a smaller temple in which there is a small statue about four feet tall of Da’mo, the history of which is not known.

At both temples, Hualin and Guangxie, there is a constant stream of visitors and worshipers streaming in to pay their respects, both young and old and also from abroad. I spent many hours at these temples on the two trips I made to Guangzhou and one gets the distinct impression that there is a lot of respect for this icon of Mahayana/Chan Buddhism even centuries after his arrival in Guangzhou.

The Hualin Temple is now being expanded, and the whole area which is surrounded by jade shops and eating places is being cleared to make space for the expansion, the work on which has already started.

As Da’mo went about preaching in Guangzhou and the surrounding areas, his fame spread over quite a large part of China. One must understand that Hinayana or ‘lesser vehicle’ Buddhism had reached China a few centuries earlier, at around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Scriptures of the Hinayana tradition, which were brought by two monks from India, reached Louyang on two white horses. Till today that temple is called the White Horse Temple because it is said that the bodies of the two monks and the carcasses of the two horses are buried here. This is also the Temple where Mr. A B Vajpayee worshiped when he visited China when he was Prime Minister of India.

But, Mahayana or ‘greater vehicle’ Buddhism caught the attention of the people and Da’mo soon had a large following. The basic difference between these two forms of Buddhism is that while Hinayana (lesser vehicle) Buddhism teaches one to seek one’s own salvation, Mahayana (greater vehicle) Buddhism teaches one to seek not only one’s salvation but encourages one to help others to seek their salvation also. This inclusive nature of Mahayana Buddhism obviously caught the attention of the people who flocked to it in droves.

Not to digress from the talk, I must also mention that the third branch that exists in today’s world is Vajrayana Buddhism or ‘diamond vehicle’ Buddhism, which is from Tibet.

As Da’mo’s fame spread in China, Emperor Wu Di of the Liang dynasty (527 AD) in Nanjing, which was the capital of China at that time, sent an emissary to Guangzhou inviting Da’mo to Nanjing. Emperor Wu was a strong supporter of Buddhism and had built many temples and propagated Buddhism at every opportunity that presented itself.

Therefore, when Da’mo and Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty finally met, the Emperor asked Da’mo what merit he had achieved in doing so much for Buddhism, to which Da’mo replied “no merit”. The Emperor was completely taken aback and finally after a few more back and forth questions and answers he asked Da’mo “who is it that stands before

me” to which he received the answer “I don’t know.”

Not making any headway in his relationship with the Emperor, Bodhidharma left and after crossing the Yangtze River ‘on a reed’ traveled to the Shaolin Temple (Temple of Little Forest). I must draw your attention of Bodhidharma crossing the Yangtze ‘on a reed’ as it has come up in different records by various authors. In my opinion, the boat he used to cross the Yangtze was shaped like a reed. Either the author of this particular reference “a boat shaped like a reed” was writing metaphorically, or was being poetic like quite a few Chinese still do.

At the Shaolin Temple he again met with resistance as the Abbot at that time didn’t like Bodhidharma’s theory of ‘not depending on the written word’. The Temple which Bodhidharma made famous was actually in existence before he arrived. It was built by another Emperor of that region, who was also a supporter of Buddhism, for another Indian monk called Batua, so that Batua could translate Buddhist scriptures into Chinese.

This temple was, and has always been, located in Deng Feng County, about 30 miles from Zhenzhou, which is the capital of present day Henan Province. Today there are also other Shaolin temples in China but the one in Deng Feng County is the original one and really became famous by the presence of Bodhidharma. Even today, he is revered at the Temple and the nearby Wushu (Kung-Fu) training center. In the fourth building of the seven buildings at the Temple there is an ancient scroll and statue of Bodhidharma, and in this temple there is always a monk chanting to Bodhidharma’s memory. The monks take this duty by rotation.

And recently from what I have heard and seen on the Internet, the new Abbot of Shaolin Temple, who is a business major, has erected a 25 foot statue on the Songshan Mountain very near the cave where Bodhidharma meditated. The Songshan Mountain is one of the five holy mountains in China and is located behind the Shaolin Temple. The cave where Bodhidharma meditated for nine years is located close to the peak of this mountain.

Again there are many stories which are mythical in nature like “he meditated for so long that his legs fell off”; “he once got so angry with himself for falling asleep that he cut of his eyelids and threw them on the ground, and this is where the first tea plants grew”; and “he returned to India after his nine years of meditation;” and many other such stories.

As far as I can infer from the available information, while he did meditate at this cave for nine years he did not do so 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Remember that he was human so he had to eat, and I am sure the monks of the Shaolin Temple would have taken him his food every day. He was highly revered by the monks and soon he became an icon among the people of China who made visits to the cave to pay their respects to him, which they do even today.

During this period, he also taught the monks the fighting art of India, which today is

known as Kalaripayat and which in those days, was known as Vermanie. In these ancient martial art forms also had a medicinal aspect, because if any student got injured he would go to his teacher for treatment, as is being done even today at Kalaripayat schools. As a prince Bodhidharma would have been taught the traditional arts, which he also propagated to his Chinese students. It all started because the long hours of meditative practice of Mahayana Buddhism was not conducive to proper circulation of blood. So he taught his students not only the martial arts but also breathing techniques, which in my opinion was related to the Pranayama and other techniques of Yoga, again which he would have learnt as part of the traditional arts training during his princely studies.

Another reason for the training of the martial arts, which he imparted to the monks, was to prepare them to be able to defend themselves against highway robbers, thieves and animals as they went from place to place preaching Buddhism. The training Director of the Wushu Training Center did mention that one of the favorite weapons of Bodhidharma was the six span staff which is equivalent to the Silamban of Kalaripayat in Tamil Nadu. In the Kalaripayat of Kerala, it is referred to as Kettukari.

Ultimately, Bodhidharma passed away and was buried at Bear Ears Mountain (Shon Er Shan) in Henan Province in China.

Pranab Mukerjee, the Indian Foreign Minister, also referred to Bodhidharma in his speech when he inaugurated the Indian Consulate in Guangzhou a few years ago, mentioning that the connection between India and China goes back centuries.

Bodhidharma's (Damo's) teachings carried on through five Patriarchs of Chan Buddhism before it took on a more Chinese philosophy after Hui Neng (638 to 713 AD) became the 6<sup>th</sup> Patriarch. This happened when Hui Neng, who was from present day Guangdong Province, shaved his head and then started teaching his version of Chan Buddhism. The place where he did this was in the compound of the Guangshie Temple, behind the main temple, and now there is a stupa erected at this spot. The Chief Priest of the Guangshie Temple says that the shaved hair of Hui Neng is buried under the stupa.

Mahayana Buddhism then traveled to Korea where it established itself and came to be known as Seon (Buddhism). From there it traveled to Japan and it is believed that in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Bodhidharma was reincarnated in Nara in the Oje Prefecture in Japan. Today there are eight important temples dedicated to Bodhidharma in Japan and the World Association of Bodhidharma is also located in Japan in which Dr. Tsutomu Kambe, who sits amongst us today, is a Vice President. One temple is located in Takahashi, which is north of Tokyo, and which is famous for the Daruma Dolls or Okiagari Koboshi/tumbler dolls which originated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Other important temples are located just outside Tokyo and in Kyoto. The most important one is in Oje, Nara Prefecture where Bodhidharma was seen by the Prince at that time. It is said that Bodhidharma is buried under the Temple. Bodhidharma/Daruma's resilience and determination and his indestructible and indomitable spirit made him a favorite of the Samurai of Japan and in

the gardens of the Temple in Oje, on its left side, there are graves with headstones of important Samurai.

Credit must be given to Japanese scholars and researchers who have done extensive work on especially the lineage of Bodhidharma from the Buddha, and also have been able to establish his burial site in China, where they are now engaged in building a temple.

I must pay due credit to those Chinese authors of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries who wrote about Bodhidharma in China - in the days when there were no modern facilities to assist them in their writing. It is only due to their writings and references to Bodhidharma that we are able to establish his bonafide and do away with the “myth” theory that is still being propagated by some so-called scholars.

Separating the imaginative stories from facts has led to the presentation of this paper and Bodhidharma’s resilience and persistence in his endeavors set an example for me to pursue this research, though at times it has been extremely difficult. As he said, “Fall down seven times, get up eight times,” or as they say in Japan “Nana Korobi Yaoki”.